

## The Books of the Word (pt. 1 of 2)

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish  
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You are all no doubt familiar with red-letter editions of the Bible, where the words of Christ in the New Testament are printed in red. The pew Bibles in this church are red-letter editions.

Now here is a curious fact: if you scan through the Gospels, the Acts, the Epistles and the book of Revelation you will quickly discover that almost all of the red ink is in the Gospels and the book of Revelation.

Here's another curious fact: if you go to an online search engine, like BibleGateway.com, and type in "the Word of the Lord" you will find 256 references to this expression, and none are in the books of Ruth, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, or the Song of Solomon. Only a few are in the Chronicles, and even there not so much as revelation from the Lord but in reference to His Word *as stated elsewhere*. A search for "thus says the Lord" reveals 341 references with similar results. Only 5 are in the Chronicles and none are in the Epistles.

Now of course this alone does not make these books of the Bible less valuable than others, but it gives a hint as to why in the New Church we do not include them among the true books of the Word. Simply put, they are not primarily about the Lord but are about people's responses to the Lord, either as historical records or as letters of application and encouragement in the Word as revealed elsewhere. The apostle, Paul, for example, wrote beautiful letters of exhortation to the members of the early churches, urging them to live honorably and with Christian integrity. In many ways they are like sermons – drawing from the Word practical applications for the affairs of daily life. But for the most part Paul did not write the Word of the Lord. In fact there are sections (like 1 Cor. 7:12 & 40) where he specifically acknowledged that he was writing not from the Lord but from his own thoughts on something.

All this raises the important question of how the fully inspired books of the Word can be determined, and why this is so important, given the fact that they are so varied in style and content.

### What Constitutes a Book of the Word?

On one hand this is easy. There are three places in the doctrines for the New Church that specifically list the books of the Word, AC 10325, NJHD 266, and White Horse 16. You can see the list in the front inside cover of your pew Bibles. Since we consider these doctrines also to be Divinely inspired we take this list as definitive. But why is it so?

To explain this in broad terms we need to remember why the Word was written and we need to pay close attention to how the Lord Himself referred to the Scriptures. On the first point we are taught repeatedly that the purpose of the Word is to connect heaven and earth, and that this is done by means of the symbolic language that discusses worldly things in its literal sense and heavenly things in its internal, spiritual sense. But more specifically, a genuine book of the Word connects *the Lord Himself* with each one of us because in its deepest spiritual sense it is all about the Lord, and in the story of the Lord's life we see the pattern for our own spiritual development or regeneration. This concept is featured in the Lord's teaching on two occasions on the day of His resurrection, the first when "beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them

*in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself*” (Luke 24:27), and the second when “He said to them, ‘These are My words, which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me’” Luke 24:44).

Now we know what the Lord meant when He used the terms, the Law and the Prophets and the Psalms, but it may not be what you think. The Law, of course, refers to the five books of Moses. But the term, the Prophets, refers not only to Isaiah, Jeremiah and the rest of the books dealing with the threat of invasion and captivity; the Jewish people classified all the historical books from Joshua through Judges, Samuel and the Kings as Prophetic because they considered them to be written by God through men – the true meaning of the word, prophecy. But they also had another class of sacred texts not mentioned in this list: they called these the *Ketuvim* or *Hagiographa*, or in English, the writings of holy men. These were different and understood to be different in that the inspiration for them was qualified by the writers’ own understanding and thought, whereas the books of the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms were so completely inspired that the writers’ own thoughts were totally suppressed, the Lord revealing to them exactly what to write.

In short, all of the books mentioned earlier, The Chronicles, Ruth, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon are among the *Hagiographa* which therefore do not have an internal, spiritual sense derived perfectly and completely from the Lord. Indeed, the whole history of the Chronicles is shrouded in mystery and they were probably written many centuries after the events described. The other books, while useful and in some cases containing lovely stories or wise anecdotes, have all been subject to debate by scholars and many were accepted into the Christian Bible only after strong opposition by critics. Some refer to the Scriptures but many do not, and in one case, Esther, there isn’t even any reference to God.

But the important thing is that the Lord Himself does not mention these books. When He refers to the Scriptures He refers only to *the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms*, which are the books we include in our version of the Word.

As for the Acts and the Epistles, again, these are clearly of a different character than the Gospels or any other Biblical books for that matter, being simple accounts of events and circumstances in the earliest years of the Christian Church, and, particularly, adaptations of the Gospel to the people of various cultures, according to the judgment of the writers, especially Paul. They are in many cases *interpretations* of the Gospel – useful and good, but not written in the language of correspondences with deep inner meaning. They are *commentaries*, plain teachings with definitive applications, which is one of the reasons they are so popular with Christians today, but they do not link the reader directly with the Lord or heaven because they do not have the continuous, providentially ordered spiritual sense.

Even the Catholic and Episcopal Churches recognize *some sort of* difference, as they light a special candle and sometimes stand for the reading of the Gospels, but not for the Epistles.

Now this is not a big deal but it’s worth noting at least in passing that Catholics also have other books, called the Apocrypha, in their Bibles that are not in the Protestant Bible. And in the last 60 years or so archeologists have discovered substantial fragments of other ancient writings, like the Dead Sea Scrolls, that appear to be long lost versions of John’s Gospel, or indeed completely

different supposedly sacred writings, like “the Gospel of Thomas,” all of which again begs the question, how can we tell for sure which books were truly, fully inspired?

### How Can We Determine the Books of the Word?

The answer seems to be .... we can't. The appearances of the literal texts are just too misleading. We simply have to be told. But then, how can we trust the person telling us?

I'm sorry, friends, I know this must seem like circular reasoning on a very arcane subject, but it's important! These are the very questions your atheist and agnostic friends are all asking, and they are significant, legitimate questions. In a simple way you could summarize them all with the single statement, “WHO SAYS,” since it's not really a question, it's an answer, a retort. Who says, for example, that the stories of warring polygamous patriarchs in some ancient middle-eastern sect ought to be revered in any way or treated as the Word of God? Who says that the strange visions of Ezekiel or Daniel, or the weird antics of the prophet, Hosea are anything other than hallucinations, or perhaps crude attempts to control the hearts and minds of others?

The simple fact is that when we have lost our way none of the familiar landmarks make sense anymore. And what we as a civilization have lost through the centuries is the understanding and appreciation of a very special way of communicating – not by statements of fact but by correspondences, by symbolism in metaphor, allegory and representative figures. These are the things that are now explained to us in the doctrines of the New Church so that we don't have to take anybody's word for it, we can see for ourselves how the books of the Word communicate eternal truths about God, providence, our human condition and the prospects for spiritual happiness.

Still, it's important that these things were written in that style so that the hard, concrete images of this natural life could contain within them the principles of eternal life, and serve as a medium of conjunction – and this is important – *whether or not anybody understood these things!* This way people could have their own freedom and rationality to discover the meaning for themselves, but even if they failed to do so earnest readers of the books would attract the power and influence of the heavens through the correspondences – through the symbolism in the imagery.

We can't take time today to review specific stories by way of illustration, but we will address this topic late next month in another sermon about how the Word signals to us about its inner meaning, and calls us to understand it.

### What About Adding to or Subtracting from the Word?

Meanwhile, you may recall a certain statement at the end of the book of Revelation that warns about adding anything to or taking anything away from ... what? – the Bible? We are often asked about this in light of the fact that we do not recognize all the books of the standard Bible as fully inspired. But look again. The exact warning is this: “I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of *this book*: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of *this prophecy*, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book” (Rev 22:18-19). This is all about the single book of Revelation, and not about the whole Christian Bible, which was not even determined, collated or bound together until

several hundred years after this writing.

Furthermore, the teaching is eerily similar to one found in the beginning of Deuteronomy, where we read, “Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I teach you to observe, that you may live, and go in and possess the land which the LORD God of your fathers is giving you. You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you” (Deut 4:1-2).

If we were to take this in a strictly literal sense there wouldn't even BE a book of Revelation, or Joshua, Judges, Kings, Psalms, Isaiah or any of the rest of the Prophets, because all these books were added over the course of many centuries after Deuteronomy was written. But the point is that this is not meant to be taken literally, except in the sense that no man, no individual from his own thought or ambition should ever dare to add or detract *from the truths in the book*.

Commentary is fine. Application is fine. Writing sermons based on the truths there is fine, as long as these sermons uphold the integrity of what is there (DP 171). This is why we respect the non-canonical books of the Bible and see them as useful for encouraging the moral and spiritual life (letter to Beyer, April 15, 1766). In fact, there are many treasures of wisdom and insight scattered throughout these books, and we include many of them in the supplemental portion of our recitation book for the children in our school. Some of them have become classics of Christian literature and are important for understanding other literature and ideas that refer to them.

But remember, the Lord HIMSELF can actually add to His own Word any time He likes, as He repeatedly predicted in the Old Testament, DID in the Gospels, and promised to do again for Christians. (More about this next week, in part 2 of this series.) However on this point Jesus did say explicitly, “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy, but to fulfill” (Matthew 5:17). God, being infinitely wise, will never change His mind and retract anything that He has said, but He WILL elaborate as required to help us understand what He means.

So what is our “take home” from all this today? There are a few things. First, we should know why certain books are left out of the New Church canon, and we should be able to explain that in simple terms without apology so that others can appreciate our respect for the Word. Second, we should know that the Lord is actually in the books of His Word with fullness, holiness and great power, all of which is accessible to us when we read reverently even without a deep understanding simply because of the correspondences between natural and spiritual things. And third, we should know that these books, unlike any others in the world, because of their complete inspiration by the Lord, have the ability to strengthen and support us in our spiritual lives and to restore our spiritual equilibrium when we are thrown off, more and more fully every day as we get their deeper meaning, all of which should serve to remind us all of the profound significance of reading from and reflecting reverently on something from the Word every day.

Amen.

Lessons: Exodus 19  
Children's Talk on the Power of the Word  
Luke 6:20-31 and Doctrine of the Sacred Scriptures #1-4